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ABSTRACT

In this four-part lesson, students examine the concept of geographic region by exploring the history of the United States Great Plains. In Part I, students gather information about the location and environment of the Great Plains in order to produce a map outlining the region in formal terms. In Part II, students examine how the region has been mapped at different stages in United States history and create informational brochures which reflect the changes the maps mark in the functional definitions of the Great Plains. In Part III, students compare descriptions of the region, from the time of the Spanish conquistadors to the early 20th century, and write their own descriptions based on these models in order to gauge how changing perceptual definitions of a region reshape its identity and its relationship to human life. Finally, in Part IV, students compare images of two cultures that made their homes on the Great Plains, Native Americans and "sodbusters," and summarize their distinct ways of life and the distinctive regional identity each brought to the Great Plains by writing imaginary letters from a Native American and a sodbuster homesick for the land they have left behind. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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Life on the Great Plains

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SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

In this four-part lesson, students examine the concept of geographic region by exploring the history of the Great Plains. In Part I, students gather information about the location and environment of the Great Plains in order to produce a map outlining the region in formal terms. In Part II, students examine how the region has been mapped at different stages in U. S. history and create informational brochures which reflect the changes the maps mark in the functional definitions of the Great Plains. In Part III, students compare descriptions of the region, from the time of the Spanish conquistadors to the early 20th century, and write their own descriptions based on these models in order to gauge how changing perceptual definitions of a region reshape its identity and its relationship to human life. Finally, in Part IV, students compare images of two cultures that made their homes on the Great Plains, Native Americans and "sodbusters," and summarize their distinct ways of life and the distinctive regional identity each brought to the Great Plains by writing imaginary letters from a Native American and a sodbuster homesick for the land they have left behind.

Learning Objectives

To explore the concept of region and learn how culture and experience influence the perception of regions; to investigate the relationships between physical geography and human systems of culture and settlement; to trace the history and character of a region as reflected in literature and art; to examine factors that influenced westward expansion in the United States.

Lesson Plan

PART I: Defining the Region

1 Begin by introducing the geographical concept of "region." In general, a region is any place that has certain characteristics that give it a measure of cohesiveness and set it apart from other regions. By this definition, a region can cover continents (e.g., the developing world) or a few city blocks (e.g., Wall Street). Whatever their scale, however, regions are essentially human constructs whose boundaries are determined by specific criteria.

- Geographers define regions in three ways, depending on the type of criteria used to set their boundaries. A *formal* definition of a region points to human or physical properties of the place, such as a shared language or common landform. A *functional* definition describes a region in terms

SUBJECT AREAS ▸

Literature: American

Literature: Biography

History: U.S.: Native American

History: U.S.: The West

History: World: Other

GRADE LEVELS ▸

9-12

TIME REQUIRED ▸

Each part of the lesson plan requires two to three class periods. Each part is a free-standing lesson adaptable as a curriculum supplement.

SKILLS ▸

map reading
interpretation of informative writing and imaginative literature
chronological thinking
historical comprehension
historical research
comparative analysis
interpretation of visual art
imaginative writing
library and Internet research skills

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ▸

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions,

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of human purposes, which may be evident in a transportation network or pattern of commerce. Finally, a *perceptual* definition of region refers to shared attitudes or emotions toward a place, which may be expressed in a name like "Dixie" or "The Big Apple." The distinction between formal, functional, and perceptual definitions of a region provides a framework for this lesson plan.

- For additional background on the concept of region, refer to the "Places and Regions" chapters in the "Standards" section of the **National Geographic Society Xpeditions** website, from which the explanations provided here are drawn. (Click on "Standards" at the Xpeditions homepage, then select "Places and Regions" in the navigational sidebar.)
- Students also can learn about the concept of region through several of the interactive exhibits in "Xpedition Hall" at the **National Geographic Society Xpeditions** website. The **Satellite Spyglass** exhibit dramatizes how regions can vary in scale with a series of satellite images that zoom in from a continent-wide view of the United States to a single block in Washington, D.C. The **Culture Goggles** exhibit illustrates the influence of culture on the perception of a region by showing visitors how the most important landmarks in Jerusalem shift as one looks at the city from a Jewish, a Christian, and an Islamic point of view. (To locate these exhibits, click on "Xpedition Hall" at the Xpeditions homepage, then use the interactive "floorplan" at the right of the screen to select "X5: Satellite Spyglass" or "X6: Culture Goggles" in the "II: Places and Regions" wing of the hall.)

2 Explain that in this lesson students will use the concept of region to explore the history of the Great Plains, an area that early maps labeled the Great American Desert but which is known today as a showcase for American agriculture.

- Use the "Atlas" at the **National Geographic Society Xpeditions** website to obtain a reproducible outline map of the "United States." (Click on "Atlas" at the Xpeditions homepage, then click on "North America" in the interactive map of the world, and click on "United States" in the interactive map of North America. Before printing out the map, select "detailed" with borders "on" at the top of the frame.) Give each student a copy of the map and have them mark on it the region they think of as the Great Plains.
- Compare the students' maps and discuss the element of interpretation that enters into the definition of a region. Focus on areas where their definitions of the region differ. Why did some students include an area that other students excluded? What characteristics of that area make it seem part of the Great Plains to them? Focus also on areas where there is agreement. What are the characteristics of these areas that lead most members of the class to identify them

style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. (more)
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (more)

National Geography Standards

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective (more)
2. How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context (more)
3. How to analyze the spatial organization of people,

as part of the Great Plains? List these defining characteristics on the chalkboard. How far could one push the boundaries of the Great Plains using these criteria?

3 Divide the class into research teams, provide each team with a fresh copy of the outline map of the United States, and have them produce maps of the Great Plains based on the geography of the region. Have each team note and/or represent on its map the *formal* characteristics they use to define this region: for example, landform, climate, average rainfall, vegetation, land use, population density, etc. Direct students to standard library reference works for their research. In addition, two websites listed in the "Resources and Links" section of the **National Geographic Society Xpeditions** website may be helpful. (Click on "Resources and Links" at the Xpeditions homepage to reach this listing.)

- The Map Machine at nationalgeographic.com provides a descriptive map of the United States indicating the general location of the Great Plains. Click on the state names in this map for individual state maps and profiles that provide information on climate, land use, and population. The Map Machine also offers Physical Maps that show the terrain of North America, and a View From Above that provides a satellite view.
- The Color Landform Atlas of the United States website offers more highly detailed relief maps and satellite images of the individual states, as well as links to additional information about each state.

4 Display the students' maps and again discuss similarities and differences, focusing this time on the formal characteristics that students have used to define the Great Plains.

- How large is the region if landform is the only defining characteristic? How are the outlines of the region affected by adding climate as a defining characteristic? Or population density? How important are political borders as defining characteristics? What is gained by defining the region broadly, as an area stretching from deep in Canada to north Texas? What is gained by defining it more narrowly?
- If students have referred to satellite images in their research, ask them to compare these images to standard descriptive maps. What kinds of information are missing from the satellite view? How are these images helpful and/or misleading for defining a region?
- Finally, ask students to speculate whether all the people living inside the boundaries they have marked would say that they live in the Great Plains region. Why or why not? How important are such cultural, social, and political perceptions to the definition of a region?

PART II: Mapping the Territory

1 Turn next to consider the influence that human purposes have played in defining the Great Plains as a region. Use EDSITEment to examine these historical maps from the **New Perspectives on THE WEST** and the **Exploring the West from Monticello** websites:

places, and environments on earth's surface (more)
4. The physical and human characteristics of places (more)
5. That people create regions to interpret earth's complexity (more)
6. How culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions (more)
9. The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human population on earth's surface (more)
10. The characteristics, distribution, and complexity of earth's cultural mosaics (more)
11. The patterns and networks of economic interdependence on earth's surface (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
3. People, Places, and Environments (more)

National Standards for Arts Education

Visual Arts

3. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas (more)
4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures (more)
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines (more)

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. (more)
2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. (more)
4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own. (more)

View your state's standards

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- At **New Perspectives on THE WEST**, in the section titled Places in THE WEST, you will find individual **state maps from the 1880s**. (Click on a state name in the interactive map on this webpage to retrieve the state map you want.) These maps identify settlements throughout the region and trace the network of railroads that had by this time knitted the Great Plains into an economic entity.
- **New Perspectives on THE WEST** also includes maps showing the region as territory set aside for Native Americans. In Places in THE WEST you will find an 1836 map of Indian territory on the southern Great Plains, which marks the areas assigned to Eastern tribes who were relocated there following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. In the Archives of THE WEST section of this website, the archive for Episode Three contains an 1851 map of Indian territory on the northern Great Plains, which was drawn up during negotiation of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851.
- At **Exploring the West from Monticello** you will find the Lewis and Clark map of the West, which charts the waterways of the region in great detail, and a 1795 map of the West, showing how geographers perceived the Great Plains before the region was scientifically explored.

2 After students have examined and compared these historical maps, ask them to consider their significance. To what extent are these maps *functional* definitions of the Great Plains region -- portraying it as an area organized by human purposes at a specific moment in American history? To help students see the maps from this perspective, ask them who the maps were made for and how they characterize the region. What do they "say" about the Great Plains? For example, you might point out that:

- The 1795 map represents the Great Plains as a trackless space, a view that stems not only from the mapmaker's lack of knowledge but also, perhaps, from the perception that this part of North America would serve mainly as a pathway to the Pacific. The Lewis and Clark map, by contrast, portrays the Great Plains as a region criss-crossed by waterways, which provide a ready means of transportation and make it seem a promising area for settlement. This view may stem in part from Lewis and Clark's failure to discover a water passage to the Pacific, but it reflects also their firsthand observation of the land and its resources.
- In the maps of Indian territories, the Great Plains is once again a nearly blank space, large enough to hold all the displaced tribes but without any features that might make it appealing to non-Native Americans. The territories assigned to each tribe are merely zones, with nothing to suggest that natural resources might make one zone preferable to another. It is noteworthy, however, that on the 1851 map, which was drawn up in consultation with the tribes involved, territorial borders reflect the natural contours of the region, its rivers and ranges, whereas on the 1836 map territories are marked out with a ruler.
- In the 1880s maps of individual Great Plains states, the region is portrayed as "inhabited" territory. Towns and forts dot the landscape, political boundaries give each part of the region a name, and in addition to rivers and streams, there are railroads connecting the Great Plains to more settled

part of the scenery.

3 Following your discussion of the historical maps, divide the class again into small groups and have each group produce an informational brochure about the Great Plains based on one of the historical maps. Their brochures should express in words and pictures the implicit message behind each map -- its *functional* view of the Great Plains -- and should reflect the circumstances of American history under which each map was produced. A brochure for the Lewis and Clark map, for example, might encourage entrepreneurs to discover for themselves the riches of the region, while a brochure based on one of the 1880s state maps might advertise the availability of extensive tracts located near major rail lines. When they have completed their brochures, have students share these historical interpretations of the Great Plains in infomercial-style class presentations.

PART III: A Sense of Place

1 To explore how human perceptions have defined the Great Plains, use EDSITEment to provide students with descriptions of the region from a variety of time periods and perspectives. The examples suggested here fall into three sets -- explorers, emigrants, and settlers. It may be convenient to divide the class into three groups and have each group compare and report on one set of descriptions.

Explorers

- **Coronado**, the first European to travel through the Great Plains, included a description of the region in his 1541 Letter to the King, which explains why he failed to discover the fabled Cities of Gold. This letter appears with other accounts of Coronado's expedition in the archive for Episode One in the Archives of THE WEST section of **New Perspectives on THE WEST**.
- **Lewis and Clark**, who opened the Great Plains to American settlement, included many descriptions of the region in their journals, which are accessible in the Archive section of the **Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery** website. Click on The Journals, find the search engine, and type in "September 17, 1804" to retrieve the entry in which Meriwether Lewis describes his first walk across the plains.

Emigrants

- **Pioneers** who crossed the Great Plains on the Oregon Trail provide us with descriptions of the region in their memoirs. Look at the first chapters of Catherine Sager's *Across the Plains in 1844*, which can be found in the archive for Episode Two in the Archives of THE WEST section of **New Perspectives on THE WEST**.
- **Forty-niners** were the next wave of travelers over the Great Plains. A selection of their memoirs is included in the California As I Saw It collection at the **American Memory** website. Look at James Abbey's *California: A Trip Across the Plains in the Spring of 1850*, especially Part 2, entitled "Indian Territory."
- **Mark Twain**, at the start of his career, traveled by

stagecoach across the Great Plains in 1861. His memoir of those days, *Roughing It*, is also included in the California As I Saw It collection at the **American Memory** website. See chapters 3 - 9 for Twain's description of the region.

Settlers

- **Farmers** arrived on the Great Plains in the 1870s, many drawn by railroad company advertisements that portrayed it as a green oasis. The settlers' most picturesque descriptions of the region appear in folk songs like "Lane Country Bachelor" and "Dakota Land" (also known as "Nebraska Land"). Texts of these two songs are available at the **National Geographic Society Xpeditions** website in a lesson plan entitled "**The Great Plains: A Harsh Welcome to Settlers?**" upon which this lesson plan is partly based. (To find this lesson plan, click "Standards" on the Xpeditions homepage, then select "Environment and Society 15" in the navigational sidebar, and click "Classroom Ideas 9-12" at the top of the frame.)
- **Ranchers** also settled on the Great Plains in the wake of railroad expansion, and their perception of the region can be found in Theodore Roosevelt's *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail,* an account of his days in the Dakotas. This book is available in the archive for Episode Seven in the Archives of THE WEST section of **New Perspectives on THE WEST**; see Chapter 1 for a cattleman's view of the plains.
- **Writers** who grew up on the Great Plains in the late-19th century provide an imaginative perspective on the region. See the stories of Hamlin Garland collected in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1922) for a perspective darkened by an awareness of the hardships of life on the Great Plains; Willa Cather's novel, *My Antonia* (1918), for a view evocative of the spiritual strength this implacable landscape could impart; and Carl Sandburg's poem "Prairie" (1918) for an epic view celebrating the picturesque beauties of the region. (Sandburg's poem is available at the **American Verse Project** website on EDSITEment; type "prairie" into the website's search engine to retrieve the text.)

2 As students read these accounts of the Great Plains, have them take notes on the natural features mentioned and the descriptive terms and adjectives used. In class discussion, compare notes to determine which features are consistently mentioned across the centuries and how they are characterized in different time periods. Focus also on each writer's portrayal of the relationship between people and the world of the Great Plains. What brings people to the region in each era, and how does this purpose influence their perception of the landscape and climate, the animal and plant life, the native inhabitants? How, too, does the writer's place in the historical procession across the Great Plains influence his or her perception of its landmarks and defining features?

3 Students will find that few of these writers offer set descriptions of the Great Plains, reporting instead on what happens there. Yet each writer to some degree expresses an attitude toward the region, provides us with a point of view that imparts a significance to this space on the map. Have students summarize these viewpoints by writing a description of the Great Plains modeled on one writer from each set of readings: an explorer, an emigrant, and a settler. Have students draw on the

vocabularies they have gathered from their reading to give three historically relevant portraits of the region. As an alternative, have students create an anthology of Great Plains writings, adding examples to those listed above, and write an introduction to each section of the anthology explaining how changing perceptions of the Great Plains throughout U. S. history have redefined the region.

PART IV: A Way of Life

1 To conclude this exploration of the Great Plains, turn to visual portrayals of life in the region. Like written descriptions, paintings and photographs convey a point of view, influenced by the culture and experience of the person making the image. In this respect they offer a complementary record of the way perceptions of the Great Plains have evolved over the centuries. At the same time, paintings and photographs provide an important supplement to the written record in their ability to convey the Native American experience on the Great Plains, whether directly through images created by Native Americans or indirectly through documentary images created by white observers.

2 Use EDSITEment to provide students with a selection of images that represent Native American life on the Great Plains. For example, in the Archives of THE WEST section of **New Perspectives on THE WEST** you will find:

- Buffalo Chase, an early 19th-century painting of mounted Plains Indians hunting buffalo by the anthropologist-artist George Catlin. (This image is part of the archive for Episode One.)
- A Shoshone elk hide portraying a mounted buffalo hunt and the dance performed to bring the hunters good luck. (This image is also part of the archive for Episode One.)
- A photograph of a Lakota encampment in the Pine Ridge area of the Dakota plains, taken in 1891. (This image is part of the archive for Episode Six.)

3 Ask students to identify common features in these three images. They will probably point out the horse, which is the only feature that all three images share. Have students suggest reasons why the horse should be, in effect, a defining characteristic of traditional Native American life on the Great Plains. Encourage students to base their explanations on the knowledge of Great Plains geography that they gained by mapping the region. How did the horse help the Indians adapt to and survive in this environment? How did it alter their perspective on the space around them? To what extent might one see the horse as an embodiment of the Plains tribes' relationship to their region?

4 To help clarify this composite picture of Native American life on the Great Plains, have students examine images of late-19th-century settlers in the region.

- There is an extensive archive of such images in the Northern Great Plains, 1880-1920 collection at the **American Memory** website, including a Pioneer Camera Exhibit within the Fred Hutstrand History in Pictures section of the collection.

- Some of the best known photographs of early "sodbusters," however, are those taken by Solomon Butcher during the 1880s in Custer County, Nebraska. A selection of his photographs is available in the archive for Episode Seven in the Archives of THE WEST section of **New Perspectives on THE WEST**. Have students examine Butcher's portraits of the Shores, an African American family, and of Omer Yern and his family, who like the Shores pose with stoic pride in front of their sod house.

5 Have students contrast these images of sodbusters with those portraying Native Americans. Point out the sod house as a constant feature of the settlers' way of life, comparable in this respect to the horse in the pictures of Native American life. Ask what the sod house suggests about the settlers' relationship to the world of the Great Plains. How did it help them adapt to and survive in this environment? How did it influence their perspective on the space around them? Have students compare the sod house and the horse as characterizing features of the Great Plains region. How do these competing "landmarks" influence our understanding of this place? How does the significance of the Great Plains shift in history as the culture of the horse gives way to that of the sod house? In what other respects do these two sets of images show how cultural values influence people's perceptions of a region and the life they fashion within it?

6 Remind students that they have examined only a small sampling of images of life on the Great Plains. Discuss briefly how they might test their interpretations through further research. Then ask students to summarize their interpretations of the Native American and the sodbusters' way of life by writing two letters, one from an Indian, the other from a settler, both homesick for the region they have left behind. What details of the natural landscape do these imaginary writers mention in their letters? What routines of living on the Plains do they recall? What questions do they ask to find out how things have changed there?

Extending the Lesson

Like the land itself, the history of the Great Plains can seem endless. For additional perspective on the region:

- Explore the **NativeWeb** website for resources on the history and present-day life of Native Americans of the Great Plains. At the website's homepage, click on Geographic Region Index, then select US - Central for a list of links to websites maintained by the Cheyenne River Sioux and other Great Plains tribes.
- Visit the **ArchNet** website for resources on the mammoth hunters who roamed the Great Plains in prehistoric times, as well as the Mandan and other early tribes of the upper Missouri whose way of life was based on agriculture and trade. At the website's homepage, click on Regional View, then click on North America in the interactive world map. Scroll down to the list of "Midwest and Plains" links for the South Dakota State Archeological Research Center.
- Go to the **New Deal Network** website for documents and images from the "Dust Bowl" era, when drought and the Great Depression combined to drive thousands from the Great Plains in an exodus John Steinbeck portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Look in the website's Document

Library for the Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee , and in the Photo Gallery for images of Dust Bowl life.

- Research one way the competiton for resources has influenced life on the Great Plains by visiting the Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850-1920 collection at the **American Memory** website. Documents here highlight in particular how seemingly enlightened policies, aimed at preserving wildlife and natural landmarks, inevitably threatened tribes who regarded the region's wildlife as a food source and its natural landmarks as sacred places. Compare this conflict between competing perceptions of the region to controversies that arise when urban preservationists identify a neighborhood as historic and work to impose their views on its inhabitants' way of life.